

What to Do When You 'Hit the Wall' at Work

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Stressed out socially? Pressured professionally? You're a candidate for burnout. It's common, but it's avoidable.

"Burnout is not for wimps," says Washington, D.C., social worker Mark Gorkin, LICSW. Many people burn out not because they're weak, but because of their tenacity, dedication, and strong sense of responsibility.

"Burnouts" aren't just responsible, Gorkin says, they're responsive as well. Other people lean on them for support. "Are you a pillar of strength for those around you?" Gorkin asks. "Are you buying into the 'superperson' role?"

If the answer is yes -- whether on the job or at home -- you're a candidate for burnout, says Gorkin, defining the condition as the gradual process by which a person, in response to prolonged stress and physical, mental, and emotional strain, detaches from work and other meaningful relationships. The result is lowered productivity, cynicism, confusion ... a feeling of being drained, of having nothing more to give.

Burnout is very common for those who work in the "helping professions," says Gorkin -- social workers, doctors, nurses, psychologists, teachers. "You start out young and idealistic and think you're going to change the world." In an attempt to do just that, you may not set appropriate boundaries. "You need to learn the importance of 'N and N' ... the ability to say 'no' and how to negotiate."

"You can't juggle all the balls all the time all by yourself," he says. That doesn't mean you're giving up on yourself. Quite the opposite -- it means you're learning to take care of yourself.

When we're giving too much and working too hard for recognition, value, meaning, and acceptance, we may not question whether what we're doing is compatible with our values, says the Reverend Dennis Kenny, DMin, who is not only a minister but also a psychologist, director of Integrative Clinical Education and Spirituality for the Institute for Health and Healing in San Francisco, and author of *Promise of the Soul: Identifying and Healing Your Spiritual Agreements*.

"When the values we have and hold aren't met, especially in the workplace," says Kenny, "that's when we often hit the wall."

To avoid burnout, Kenny says to seek flexibility and balance. "Look at the spiritual agreements that are part of your life. Then look at the rest of your life. Are you living your values?"

If not, it may be time to think about a new job, even a new career, says Kenny. "Dust off your resume. Apply for positions that better meet your values." In the meantime, don't neglect the job you already have.. Take classes that expand your expertise as well as classes that will give you new skills. And make your workday environment special for yourself. Add plants, pictures, whatever reflects who you are. "Make yourself feel at home when you're at work. That will help you feel more alive."

Think you may be suffering from burnout? Evelyn Sassoon, PsyD, a clinical psychologist in New York City in private practice and on staff at Columbia-Presbyterian Eastside Hospital, says these are signs you may have fallen victim to burnout yourself:

- You don't enjoy activities and relationships you once enjoyed.
- You feel numb and less focused.
- You're not experiencing your normal range of emotions.
- You feel exhausted and drained.
- You feel as if you're going through the motions, but aren't quite "all there."
- You're regressing to patterns and emotions that you thought you had left behind.
- You feel as if you were on a treadmill.

If you don't think you're quite at the burnout stage yet, there are things you can do that may keep the condition at bay, says Sassoon.

- Get plenty of rest.
- Eat a healthy diet and exercise regularly.
- Try to get control of your schedule, and don't overload on difficult or stressful projects.
- Re-establish your priorities. Set realistic goals and stick to them.
- Be kind to yourself, even when you don't live up to all of your own expectations.
- Plan breaks during the day, evening, and weekend to relax and energize -- stretch your muscles, exercise, go for a walk, listen to music, call a friend.
- Plan activities you enjoy. See a movie, go out to dinner, see a friend, or

develop a hobby to achieve balance in your life, and take your mind off the stress.

- Be sure to get together with friends, just to talk or to enjoy a shared activity.
- Develop a relationship with someone you trust and in whom you can confide -- a therapist, a good friend, or a family member.

If you are suffering from burnout, says Mark Gorkin, see it as a double-edged sword that offers both "danger and opportunity." Danger, because the unrelenting stress that has led to the burnout in the first place is not good for either your mental or your physical health, but opportunity, because if you recognize the burnout for what it is, you can set yourself on a new path.

"Fireproof your life with variety," Gorkin says. "Challenge yourself, whether it's with a new hobby or a new career path. Take a risk."

That's not a recommendation to act impulsively, says Gorkin, but rather to deal with your feelings so that you can reach an understanding in a clear way. Ask yourself: What are my options? What do I really want at this point in my life? What have I not been listening to?

Burnout brings with it a sense of grief, says Gorkin. "Something has died. Something is not the same." Grieve your lost sense of optimism or ideals. Once you have gone through the grieving process though, your energy and enthusiasm will return.

"If we can let go," he says, "things we can't imagine can appear."